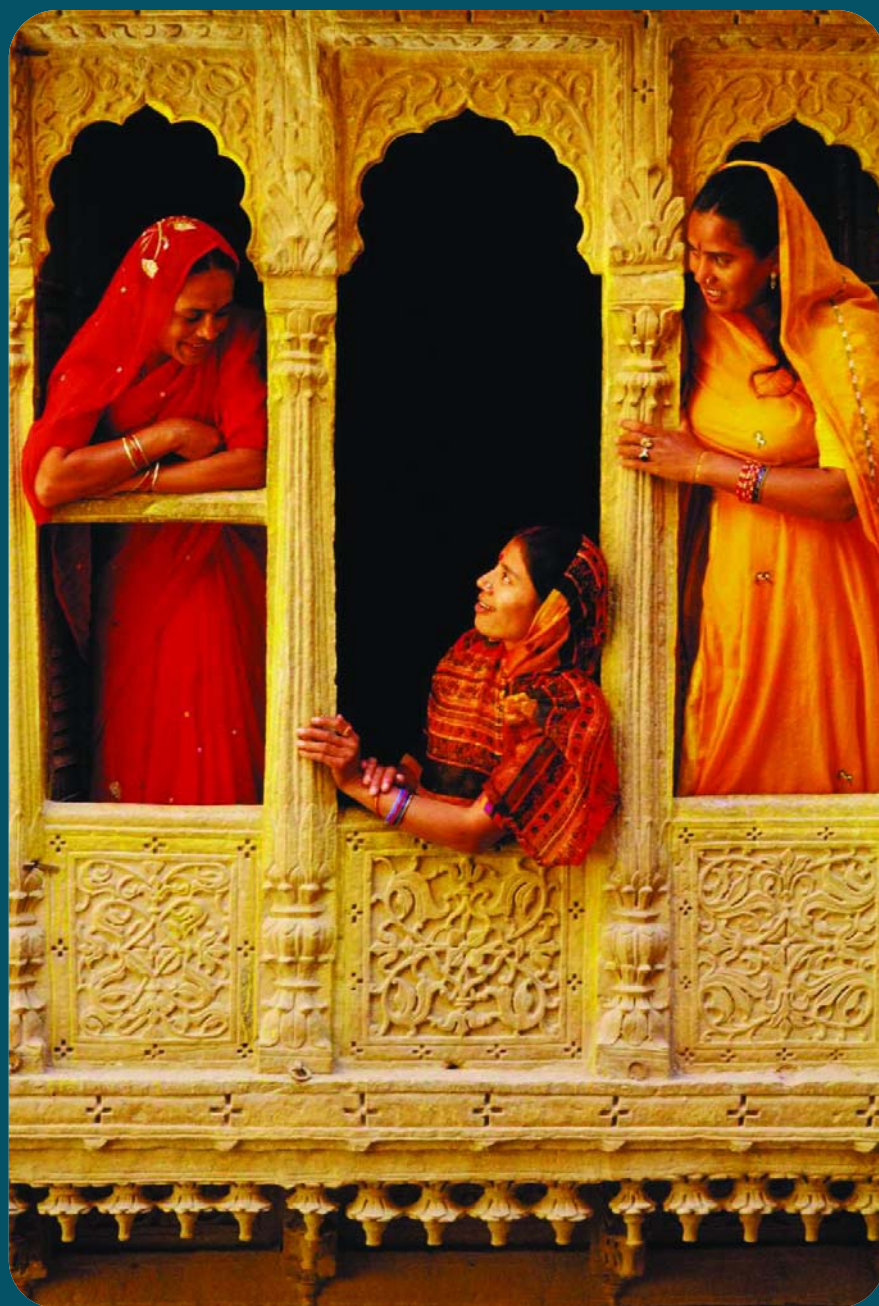


More people in India are getting hooked on Discovery Channel. Its customized programs on diverse themes and smart distribution strategy have helped the channel make inroads in the cable TV market.

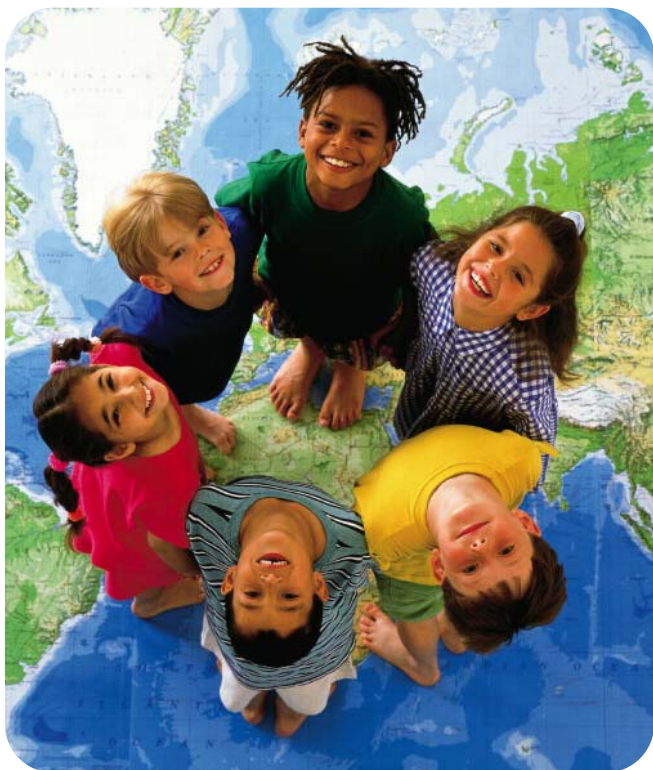
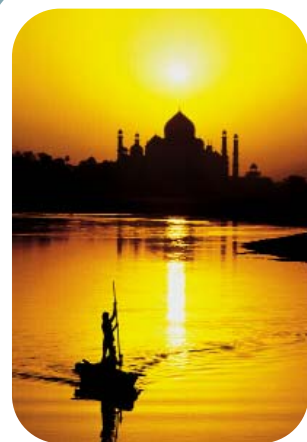


Discovering New Horizons and Markets

By DINESH C. SHARMA



Real-world entertainment is offered by Discovery Channel and its subsidiaries through programs about people, places and wildlife.



Photographs courtesy Discovery Channel

Kushagr is five years old. Like most children of his age, he loves watching animated cartoons every day. While surfing channels between commercial breaks, his fingers often stop when he sees images of a space shuttle taking off or a submarine diving or a giant crocodile with its jaws open. He enjoys watching kids fiddling with mechanical gadgets or playing with electronic pets and mini robots. He picks up sounds and commentary in Hindi and is often mesmerized by visuals that are quite different from what he sees on the channels watched by other family members. Then comes a barrage of questions to his father or elder sibling.

It is people like Kushagr and his family, who have gotten

hooked on a different kind of television programming in India, pioneered by the Discovery Channel 10 years ago. In its formative years in India, the channel was often linked with wildlife programming and children's educational shows. Since then it has developed into a general interest channel for viewers of all ages and diverse interests, and competes with mainstream infotainment channels.

India is one of the world's most vibrant television markets with nearly 300 cable, satellite and terrestrial channels in about two dozen languages. Nearly 20 satellites beam in television programming. There are more than 100 million television homes and more than 60 million of them receive TV through cable or satellite. Discovery added a new niche to the Indian market, what it calls real-world programming, not to be confused with science or education programming. It covers a broad spectrum of subjects—science, technology, medicine, engineering, health, environment, wildlife, adventure, culture and traditions, agriculture, cinema, fashion, sex, and so on.

"Discovery Channel's success in creating a new genre of television in India, real-world entertainment, has encouraged the launch of many channels in India," says Deepak Shourie, managing director of Discovery Networks India, a subsidiary of the U.S.-based Discovery Networks International.

Since its launch in the United States in 1985, Discovery has spread to 160 countries. It offers 13 international brands, reaching 665 million subscribers. In India, another major competitor is National Geographic Channel, but Discovery says it also competes with channels beyond this segment. Says Shourie: "The presence of more channels in the space has only helped grow the market. In fact, our current competition is more with the English movie and news channels."

Prior to Discovery, programs on science and technology, medicine or environment were rarely seen on Indian television. Such themes were usually categorized as educational and produced in rather unimaginative style and broadcast on the government-run network, Doordarshan. They rarely attracted advertisers and were thus financially unviable for private producers. Discovery, with its international experience and gripping production style, changed this. Educational themes became entertaining and began getting commercial sponsors—



vital for any channel to survive.

“The programming relating to science and technology, health and environment on Indian television is pathetic. This is despite the proliferation of channels, including round-the-clock news channels, where there is so much scope for such coverage,” says N. Bhaskar Rao, director of the Centre for Media Studies in New Delhi. “Our research has shown that hardly two percent of space in news bulletins is devoted to anything which could fall in the category of science and technology. Discovery certainly offers an option, an impressive choice.” Rao says that is the reason Discovery has been able to sustain its position in a “market driven competitive scenario.”

Today, Discovery reaches 32 million subscribers in India, roughly half of the cable and satellite homes. Animal Planet reaches 22 million homes, the channel’s officials say. Almost all top television advertisers sell their brands on Discovery Channel. Big contributing factors to this success are customized programming in Hindi and a dose of India-specific themes.

The channel decided to localize its content early. It started a Hindi feed with programs dubbed from English in 1998, to attract viewership in smaller cities and towns. In addition, its “Discover India” series projected different aspects of traditional and modern India, successful Indians in various walks of life and advances in science and the arts. The idea of the series is to let Indians get a glimpse of their country from a global perspective. Discovery’s English feed also continues to be available to Indian viewers.

“The Hindi feed has helped us reach millions of viewers across India,” says Raja Balasubramanian, brand director at Discovery

India. The local content has been mostly acquired from independent producers, both Indian and international. Now the channel has started commissioning local production houses to produce India-centric programs. Some of these will be shown in Discovery Channel’s other markets as well.

The next logical extension of the India strategy would seem to be further customizing in other Indian languages, but the channel is not ready for it yet. “The costs of dubbing and technical reasons do not permit more language feeds. There is no plan for any other regional languages at the moment,” Balasubramanian says.

Along with India-specific content and the Hindi feed, Discovery followed a different path to market the channel among advertisers and distribute it nationwide. “We introduced the time-band strategy, keeping in mind viewers’ diverse media consumption habits,” points out Shourie, who had worked with leading Indian print and television corporations.

Shrugging off its image as “a documentary and wildlife channel,” it created new bands of programming such as Sunrise, Women’s Hour, Discovery Kids, Late Night Discovery, targeting specific viewer groups. The move paid dividends almost immediately, with the channel’s viewership increasing manifold. It also helped advertisers, allowing them to reach out to a well-

defined consumer segment more efficiently, says Shourie.

Yet another contributing factor for the rise of Discovery in India is its distribution strategy. In a cable and satellite distribution market with several players and local distribution channels, selection of the right partner is a must for any channel. For nationwide distribution, Discovery entered into a partnership with Sony Entertainment Television India. This platform is known as One Alliance. It distributes channels of Sony, Discovery and NDTV, besides AXN, Animax, SAB TV and Ten

The “Discover India” series showcases different aspects of traditional and modern India, giving Indians a glimpse of their country from a global perspective.

Clockwise from far left: Globe Trekker host Ian Wright; a Discovery Travel & Living program; and a history show on the Sphinx.

Sports. This distribution partnership substantially helped Discovery reach the present level of viewership, say channel officials.

Animal Planet was launched in India in 1999, overlapping Discovery's programs on wildlife. But Discovery officials say there is a difference. "Discovery presents real-world entertainment and covers genres like history, science, adventure, engineering, mystery, etc., while Animal Planet is completely dedicated to people's fascination with animals," explains Balasubramanian. The company plans to market Animal Planet aggressively this year.

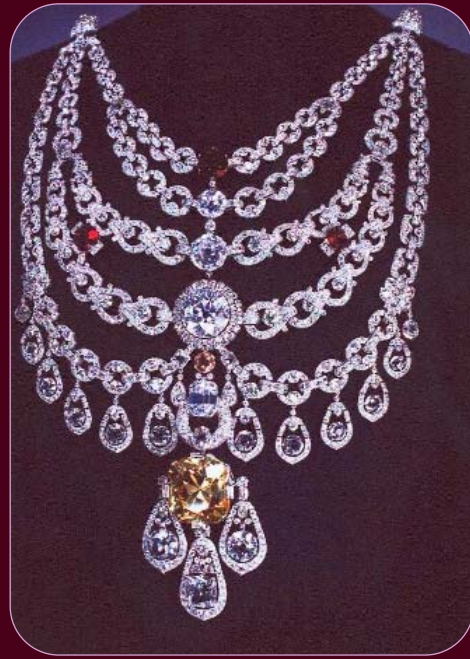
The latest member of the Discovery family in India is Travel & Living, which was launched in October 2004. It is aimed at the so-called global Indian. Its programming mix includes travel, cuisine, design, décor and fashion. The channel has commissioned two India-specific series, as viewer demand for Indian content is rising, in India and abroad. The series—on Indian cities and food—will air this year.

"Discovery has been a successful pioneer. National Geographic Channel and the History Channel which followed had the market opened for them by Discovery," says Sevanti Ninan, media critic and editor of the media portal thehoot.org. "Its blend of Indianization and mainstream international content has worked well, made non-fiction programming popular and created a formula that other international non-fiction channels can copy."

While the Hindi feed and local programming has helped Discovery attract new audiences, some feel that the channel at times reinforces stereotyped images of India with extensive coverage of tantrics, witches and the supernatural. The quality of Hindi translation—it is too literal—and the level of knowledge required to grasp science and technology programs also are points of criticism. "Their science and technology programs are excellent, but they are targeted more at elite audiences with a certain level of education and prior knowledge," says Subodh Mahanti, a scientist with Vigyan Prasar, a science popularization arm of the government's Department of Science and Technology.

In fact, localization of content has been the cornerstone of success for satellite television in India as well as South Asia. As David Page and William Crawley pointed out in their book *Satellites over South Asia: Broadcasting, Culture and the Public Interest*: "The satellite revolution enables the international media to speak to the English-knowing middle class in one language and the greater Indian middle class in others. The fact that these audiences watch programs in different languages does not prevent them from being targeted with similar products and lifestyles." □

About the Author: *Dinesh C. Sharma is a science and environment journalist based in New Delhi. He contributes regularly to News.com (U.S.) and The Lancet (U.K.).*



A Peep into Indian Royalty

In the past 10 years, Discovery has aired several popular programs on themes ranging from Cleopatra's palace to the inside of a space station. As far as India-related themes are concerned, the lives and tales of maharajas and royals continue to fascinate audiences. This can be gauged from the popularity of a program on the legendary Patiala necklace (above).

It was an interesting tale of a necklace created by the house of Cartier for Maharaja Sir Bhupinder Singh of Patiala in 1928. It is supposed to be one of the most expensive pieces of jewelry ever made. The necklace is famous for its unmatched brilliance and extraordinary design. With five rows of platinum chains, it had 2,930 diamonds embedded in it, including the world's seventh largest DeBeers diamond. But this magnificent necklace disappeared around 1948 and was recovered by Cartier five decades later. The program revealed the story behind this piece of jewelry, with a backdrop of the colorful and romantic ambience of the royal families.

The channel launched a new series on the maharaja of Jodhpur in late 2005. It portrayed the story of the Oxford-educated Maharaja Gaj Singh II, who is credited with pioneering the heritage hotel movement in Rajasthan and in India. Gaj Singh returned to India in 1970, after the princely states had been derecognized and official support had ended. He faced adversity with dignity and reorganized his affairs and estates, while charting a new path through social and political realignments, commercial enterprise and the creation of charitable foundations and trusts.

—D.C.S.